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Greetings, Middlebury class of February 2016. I want to congratulate you with a poem. It is a poem about the great outlines of winter and the great inspiration in a time of freezing temperatures and colder sunlight and long hours of reflection in the dark. And I will read it twice because you need to hear me say it at least twice. This poem reminded me of you—the winter graduates, February 2016.

Starlings in Winter
Mary Oliver

Chunky and noisy,
but with stars in their black feathers,
they spring from the telephone wire
and instantly

they are acrobats
in the freezing wind.
And now, in the theater of air,
they swing over buildings,

dipping and rising;
they float like one stippled star
that opens,
becomes for a moment fragmented,

then closes again;
and you watch
and you try
but you simply can't imagine

how they do it
with no articulated instruction, no pause,
only the silent confirmation
that they are this notable thing,

this wheel of many parts, that can rise and spin
over and over again,
full of gorgeous life.

Ah, world, what lessons you prepare for us,
even in the leafless winter,
even in the ashy city.
I am thinking now
of grief, and of getting past it;

I feel my boots
trying to leave the ground,
I feel my heart
pumping hard. I want

to think again of dangerous and noble things.
I want to be light and frolicsome.
I want to be improbable beautiful and afraid of nothing,
as though I had wings.

As you gather here with your families, your friends, your professors, your advisors as witnesses to all your hard work over the past four years, I want to tell you: there isn't a line in this poem that doesn't remind me of all the things that you are.

You came to us in winter. You began like the starlings to fly in winter. You are 124 graduates: 76 women and 48 men. You flew in from 29 states and 9 countries. And I can describe to you how you flew—how you have been acrobats in the freezing wind. Almost 20 percent of you completed a joint major or a double major. Seven percent of you majored in a foreign language, and 90 percent of you

studied at least one foreign language at Middlebury. Twenty percent of you took on the rigors of the Middlebury Language Schools, and almost 50 percent of you studied abroad. Eight of you played on varsity teams, two of whom were named to NESCAC All-Academic teams. You skied competitively for Middlebury and also skied on the World Cup circuit. You represented Denmark in the 2010 Olympics at Vancouver.

You have been stars dipping and rising across the arc of your Middlebury career, and as a result made Middlebury better for all of us. You founded the M Gallery, which supports and promoted student arts initiatives by curating and hosting exhibits, funding projects and publishing finished work and criticism, so that all students could enjoy the arts. You created the Heartland Project, a documentary capturing environmental issues in small towns across America, so that we on campus could learn from them. You recorded your first albums—whether with a Middlebury band or your own electronic music, in China and around the world.

You have done things which people thought were impossible. You have done things which you yourself have thought were impossible. Many of us, watching you, have simply not been able to imagine how you have done it: You have brought students, architects, builders and educators together to design and build sustainable projects for island communities off the coast of Maine. You have documented global maritime trade in the 17th century by examining the paint in one small piece of ceramic tile. You led the solar decathlon in 2013, as design leaders and ceramicists who made the bathroom sink and all of the plates, bowls, and mugs for the award-winning house.

And what lessons you have prepared for us, even in the leafless winter: You created Integrando a Mexico 2012, a summer camp on youth empowerment and social entrepreneurship. You encouraged and cultivated active citizenship and participation in the democratic process on the Middlebury College campus through voter registration and the facilitation of absentee ballot requests. You created dramatic performances about the lives of Muslim women around the world. Through your work in the world, you have created examples for all of us to follow.

And here is the part that is much harder sometimes for the world to see: you have fragmented, come apart and then become whole again. You wouldn't be here with us, flying in leafless winter, if you had not struggled—if you had not come apart and then become whole again. Don't ever forget those moments even though they might be difficult to remember. Don't ever forget that, even though we marvel at you, you should marvel at yourselves. Because you have done what you thought you could never do. You overcame your own self-doubt, your own sense that you were not perfect at something.

And as you struggled with this you became resilient. You understood something powerful about your own staying power and ability to believe a vision even if you yourself much less the world didn't believe it—at least not at first. And then slowly through one small act after another you became whole again. And you acted your vision on behalf of all of us. You were making all of us better. You have risen and spun and started all over again, full of gorgeous life.

So now you fly one more time away from us in the leafless winter. May you rise and spin and start all over again, full of gorgeous life. We marvel at you now and we will marvel when you come back to see us at Middlebury. We know that you will be gloriously spinning taking your place in the world. And creating horizons filled with visions and patterns and inspiration. You are improbable, beautiful, and afraid of nothing. As though you had wings.

Let me remind you of who you are again.

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